Terror as Repression Inside the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro

In Brazil, Rio de Janeiro is commonly referred to as the "marvelous city." Surrounded by the ocean and steep hills covered in green, the city has always been the postcard of the country. Rio, the second largest city in Brazil, is also a large economic center, and features some of the most expensive real estate in the country. However, Rio is also a city of contrasts and inequalities. Approximately 20 percent of its population lives in favelas, a type of shantytown.[1] These people live a life surrounded by violence from both State and non-State actors resulting in what Michael Taussig, in his study of rubber trade in the Putumayo, calls a "space of terror."[2] However, these areas did not become spaces of terror by accident, they are the product of a historical process that elaborated ways of creating a certain stability for the upper classes in a country with extreme levels of economic inequality.

The Brazilian government often argues that the violence used inside the favelas is necessary to combat drug dealers. However, the methods employed by the police, such as general search warrants that allow them to invade any house,[3] hardly differentiate between innocent favela residents and criminals. Therefore, a series of questions needs to be considered. What kind of violence does the State use against favela residents? What are the effects of this violence? What legitimizes violence against this specific segment of society? Louis Althusser's concepts of Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses[4] are helpful tools to understand the situation. The police in Rio works as part of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), while other institutions, especially the media, function as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) that legitimize an ideology that tolerates, and even encourages, violence against a specific group of subalterns: the favela residents. The methods used by the police can be qualified as state terrorism, which, according to Jefferey Sluka, another theorist of State terrorism, "refers to the use or threat of violence by the state or its agents or supporters, particularly against civilian individuals and populations

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as a means of political intimidation and control."[5] The terrorism carried out by the State helps sustains a space of terror that contributes to the marginalization of these communities and suppresses their political power, thus preserving a status quo plagued by inequalities.

FAVELAS: MARGINALIZED SPACES

The favelas began to appear along the hills of Rio de Janeiro in the end of the 19th century. At first the government attempted to eliminate them, but eventually it began to take action to urbanize these areas.[6] The urbanization project had limited success and today these shantytowns are located alongside upper-class neighborhoods. Compared to the rest of the city, residents from the favelas have always been underserved or excluded from state services such as education, sanitation, health care and security. The absence of the State in these areas leaves a vacuum that was occupied by drug traffickers, who now base their operations from the hills and sell drugs in lower areas of the favelas that border the urbanized city. These spots are called bocas (mouths) and are accessible to the upper classes. The traffickers are organized into factions that fight amongst themselves for control of different favelas and bocas and who fight the State to maintain what in turn is a very profitable business. The majority of the favela population is stuck between these various conflicts.[7]

Because of these contrasts binary oppositions have appeared contrasting the urbanized city with the favelas – the most common being morro (hill) to refer to the favelas and asfalto (asphalt) to refer to the city. People from each of these environments rarely socialize with one another; one of the major exceptions being instances of crime. The lack of social interaction results on the marginalization of favela residents. They are habitually referred to as favelados, a pejorative term. The word favelado often evokes the image of a black man, probably in his early twenties and dressed in shabby clothes, thus adding a racial component to the situation. There is a strong narrative of Brazil as a "racial democracy," which only recently has been undergoing criticism.[8] Even though Brazil is a highly miscegenated country – and the favelas a diversified space – in urban centers a majority of black people live in these shantytowns. This is due to Brazil's modernization project, which failed "to incorporate large segments of the population into modern sectors of the economy, society, and political system" and resulted on the exclusion of these social groups from certain rights and services guaranteed by the government.[9] Therefore, the situation in Rio and other urban centers in Brazil can be defined as social apartheid; large segments of the population are concentrated in a certain area and excluded from certain rights. Even though for the most part the favelas are not walled-off, the police sometimes establish checkpoints to search for drugs and weapons. Also, the rich have built walls with electric fences around their condominiums. The division between favelas and other spaces is clearly defined and it is the side on which one is situated in that determines his or hers identity.

THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF THE BRAZILIAN MILITARIZED POLICE

The Brazilian police system is divided into three forces, each of them having a specific function. However, instead of creating a more efficient police, this specialization fosters animosity and results in an increased use of illegal violence in the competition for criminals.[10] Today, the role of the federal police (PF) is mostly reduced to patrolling the borders

and dealing with immigration. The civil police (PC) are non-uniformed and exert a juridical role by running criminal investigations. The militarized police (PM) are uniformed and work to prevent and intervene with any crimes taking place. The PM patrols the streets and usually makes the arrests, once an arrest is made the criminal proceeding is passed to the PC.

Because of the nature of the PM's work, it is the force usually engaged in visible conflict and that is in constant contact with the civilian population. The PM is subordinate to the military, making its organization highly hierarchical and adopting military practices and procedures.[11] The training is organized like boot camp, preparing for war instead of civil policing.[12] Furthermore, crimes committed by militarized police officers are not dealt with by the civil justice system, but by military justice; a process that "weaken[s] the rule of law, extends the impunity and violence of the military police in dealing with the civilian population and indirectly assures them wide latitude for arbitrary behavior."[13]

All of this constitutes what Jorge Zaverucha calls an "institutional hybrid,"[14] in which public safety becomes militarized, defined by a military discourse and dealt through military tactics. In Brazil, public safety is still understood through the prism of the ideologically legitimized violence of the old military dictatorship, but now the war on crime has replaced the war against subversives. The police, the media and politicians use the war discourse, referring to a "war on drugs" or a "war on crime." This discourse helps shape the criminal into an enemy that needs to be eliminated and legitimizes a "by any means necessary" position.[15] As Benoni Belli states:

From what it appears, the military organization of the PM reinforces the ideology of the delinquent as enemy, since at the police officer enters an organization that trains for war. The deaths, which should be discouraged, are calculated as acts of bravery, with little consideration that the confrontation could have been avoided with some kind of negotiation. There is no space for negotiation in the battlefield.[16]

These acts of bravery are rewarded either through promotion or salary increase.[17]

It is from within this institutional framework that the abuse of violence by the police is internally legitimized. In 2007, the police in Rio de Janeiro killed at least 1,260 people and "all were officially categorized as 'acts of resistance' and underwent little or no serious investigation."[18] The number is even more alarming because on average the number of estimated police homicides is more than double the number of reported police homicides.[19]

THE POLICE INSIDE THE FAVELAS

Abuse of violence by the part of the police reaches its highest extremes inside the favelas. Because of the presence of drug traffickers, the favelas are perceived as the locus of crime and violence in Rio. Even though only 1 to 3 percent of the population in these areas is involved in drug trafficking, police operations effectively target all residents.[20] As Amnesty International reports:

Policing in Rio de Janeiro continues to be characterized by large-scale operations in which heavily armed police units 'invade' favelas only to pull out once the operation has been completed. [...] Damage to property and infrastructure, the closure of businesses and curfew-like conditions preventing people from

going to work and studying, impose financial and social costs long after the operation is over.[21]

These sweeping actions are justified by blurry distinctions between criminals and residents. As an example, "marginal" is a term commonly used to refer to criminals but that is also used pejoratively against favela residents. Marginal is an example of all-encompassing categories that fail to distinguish between very different groups. It associates criminality to poverty and encourages the same methods – violence and repression – to deal with what in turn are very different social phenomena. Through this use of language the drug dealers and the poor become one in the same.

Favelas and their residents have always been defined as social problems lacking in material goods and civility. This view constructs these populations as dangerous and criminal; a homogenizing perspective of what is actually a very heterogeneous environment.[22] The general view of the favela is that it is located in the fringes of modernity. Small unpainted houses, visible wiring illegally sucking electricity from other areas, narrow and unorganized streets, precarious sewage system and high population density all contribute to the image of the favela as a space between civilization and nature; a place where violence is inherent.[23] When the PM carries out its aggressive operations inside the favelas it reproduces the image of the favela as a wretched environment. When the media describe shootouts and release the number of casualties it provides the rest of the city with an image they can oppose themselves to: the asfalto is civilized while the morro is primitive. The upper classes adopt a perverted Hobbesian perspective[24] in which favela residents are located in a degenerated state of nature and in a constant state of bellum omnium contra omnes. The issue, however, is that in this context the violence does not actually occur in a "state of nature." Much of it is actually conducted by "civilization" – by the Brazilian State.

BOPE: THE EMBODIMENT OF TERROR

The Special Police Operations Battalion (BOPE) functions as an agent of terror on behalf of the State. The BOPE is the elite force of the PM and is infamous for its widespread use of torture, disrespect for human rights and summary executions.[25] It was created to invade enemy territories, not for policing.[26] Its status as an elite force serves as a justification for its violent character. Whereas the conventional police in Brazil – the PM, PC and PF – are considered to be very corrupt, the BOPE is seen as incorruptible. Elite da Tropa, a fictionalized[27] account of everyday life inside the BOPE, provides some insight as to why incorruptibility is such an important theme in the organization's ethics:

What is the antidote for the corruption? In the BOPE's history, the answer was only one: pride. Personal and professional pride. Respect for the black uniform. Death before dishonor. The selection process was so difficult and painful, the initiation ritual was so dramatic, that belonging became the most precious good. Being a member of the BOPE, sharing that identity, converted into the most valuable endowment. The self-esteem is priceless. Therefore it is nonnegotiable.[28]

Police morality and high-mindedness nurture cohesion and justify the use of excessive force.[29] This is an even stronger factor inside the BOPE, whose training course is permeated with hazing and humiliation. The process is so intense

that only 14 out of 58 candidates graduated out of an August 2008 training course.[30] The result of such a process is high levels of unity and pride within the group. The group sees itself so highly that it refers to other police forces as pés-de-cão (dog's feet) and is highly critical of their corruption.[31]

Images of terror are pervasive throughout the BOPE's symbols. Its logo, which stamps the organization's uniforms and vehicles, is a skull with a knife going through the top superimposed over two crossed handguns. The message is clear: they are carriers of terror and death. This message is reinforced by the word used to refer to BOPE officers: caveira (skeleton). Terror is also explicit in the exercise songs the officers sing:

Homem de preto,	*Man in black*
Qual é sua	*What is your*
missão?	*mission?*
É invadir favela	*It's to invade favela[s]*
E deixar corpo no	*And leave bodies*
chão.	*on the ground*
Se perguntas de	*If you ask where I*
onde venho	*come from*
E qual é minha	*And what is my*
missão	*mission*
Trago a morte e o	*I bring death and*
desespero,	*desperation,*
E total	*And total*
destruição.	*destruction.*[32]

The "black" refers to the uniform, which distinguishes them from the ordinary police and at the same time gives them a death squad aspect. Also, in the songs there is no distinguishing between criminals and innocent people; the objective is to spread terror and death throughout the favela. Since the BOPE acts almost exclusively inside the favelas the upper classes are not affected by these images of terror.

A BOPE instrument that has grown notorious is the caveirão (big skull) – "a security van that has been adapted into military-style assault vehicle," including a rotating turret.[34] The government claims the caveirão is used to police the favelas and protect officers in dangerous missions. However, favela residents have reported several abuses, such as random firing and torture inside the vehicles. Whenever the caveirão starts roaming through the favela, intimidations such as "We have come to take your souls"[35] are issued through its loudspeakers. For the favela resident, the caveirão is literally a vehicle of terror announcing its presence to all those it might encounter, regardless if they have broken the law or not. The caveirão has become such an agent of terror that it has colonized the imaginary of favela residents. In children, "the innocent fear of the 'bogeyman' has been replaced by that of the caveirão."[36] Thus, state terrorism proves to have a pervasive effect – by entering the subconscious it ceases to be just a then and there experience and acquires a supernatural character impossible to evade. Even when there is no conflict involving the police or drug dealers, the resident is always living with the fear that something could happen at any time.

THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE AND TERROR IN THE FAVELAS

The violence and terror employed inside the favelas have tangible effects. People who live in the favelas are already alienated from the political process because of the poverty and social exclusion they experience. Because the political world is inaccessible to them, many withdraw into the private sphere and internalize a sense of inferiority.[37]

Violence has made matters worse. When she returned to Rio in 2001 to relocate the people she had studied and reassess the findings of her 1976 book The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio De Janeiro, Janice Perlman discovered that what

had changed the most in favelas was a drastic increase in fear:[38]

This fear diminishes the use of public space, leads to less socializing among friends and relatives, fewer memberships in community organizations, less sense of trust and less networking. […] People feel trapped between the drug dealers and the police. They feel the police does more harm and provides less help than the drug dealers, but see both as disrespectful of life in the community.[39]

This argument is supported by the fact that membership in resident's associations has fallen from 28 percent in 1968 to only 3 percent in 2001.[40] The fact that the police are just as feared as drug dealers – if not more – is indicative of their problematic presence. For favela residents they are not part of the solution, but an essential component in creating a space of terror.

The space of terror in the favelas is so pervasive that it functions as a barrier to combat that terror. When residents from a favela allied with Amnesty International and other groups to organize a campaign against the caveirão, fear was the main obstacle to acquiring a large number of signatures and significant participation.[41] Terror proves to be such an efficient tactic because it is difficult to get through the fear and develop forms of challenging it. The transformation of favelas into spaces of terror serves as a restraint against the political mobilization of residents from those areas. Whereas social exclusion from the outside prevents favela residents from being assimilated into political life, fear serves as a deterrent against internal organization and mobilization. Perhaps the most telling insight comes from an interview Hélio Luz, a former chief of the PC in Rio, gave in the documentary Notícias de uma Guerra Particular:

The police are corrupt. I mean: the institution that exists is an institution that was created to be violent and corrupt. And people question: "Why was it created to be violent and corrupt?" The police was made to provide security to the state and the elite. I work with a politic of repression in benefit of the State for the protection of the State.[42]

The argument that police works in benefit of the "elite" is supported by the way the different ways it interacts with the lower and upper classes:

Burglaries are well investigated when upper-class residences are robbed. Upper-class people may pay the police for having stolen property returned; they may also ask the police to 'be tough' (to torture) to get information. However, burglaries of poor people's homes tend to be ignored.[43]

When combating crime the police works for the interests of the upper classes, and by spreading terror throughout the favelas it functions as a RSA. The police organization is required to maintain the control of political and economic forces in the hands of the upper classes. But even if that is so, how are tactics such as torture and summary executions– tactics usually condemned in democratic and open societies– legitimized?

IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUSES AND THE LEGITIMIZATION OF VIOLENCE

Althusser proposes a basic difference between Repressive State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses: "The Repressive State Apparatus functions 'by violence,' whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function 'by ideology'."[44] The police in Brazil, and in every State for that matter, are part of the RSA, whereas those institutions considered

to be "outside" of the State – such as the media, the family and religion – are ISAs. According to Althusser, even though these institutions are private they are still subordinate to "bourgeois law." In Rio, ISAs legitimize an ideology that tolerates high levels of violence against favela residents. The following analysis will concentrate specifically on the role of the media as ISAs.

The first thing that needs to be taken into consideration is that in Rio the "if it bleeds, it leads" mentality is dominant; crime stories are a prominent element in media coverage. However, while newspapers, magazines, television and radio extensively cover crimes committed against the upper classes, crimes against the poor are for the most part ignored.[45] Often crime stories involving upper-class victims take the form of dramatic personal narratives that focus on the life and suffering of the victim and his or her family. The coverage of the death of Jõao Hélio Fernandes Vieites in is useful in illustrating and discussing the issues with this kind of practice.

On February 7, 2007, three young men surrounded a car in Rio in order to steal it. They ordered the people inside the vehicle to get out. Vieites's mother, sister and a family friend all got out, but the robbers took off before Vieite was able to fully exit the car. As the robbers drove away, Vieite's head was dragged against the asphalt until he finally died. The event resulted in an outcry from citizens, politicians and the media – the latter playing an aggressive role in demonizing the robbers and portraying the suffering of the victim's family. The four men involved in the robbery and Vieite's death were arrested the following day, among them a 16-year-old. Immediately calls for severe punishment, including reducing the criminal age and the legalizing the death penalty, began to appear.

Veja, the weekly newsmagazine with the highest circulation in Brazil, ran articles and editorials on the event portraying Vieite's family's pain and calling for harsher methods and penalties against criminals. A week after the crime occurred, Veja ran an article[46] that referred to the men arrested as "monsters" and to Vieite as a "public martyr." The article mocked those who argued that there are structural roots to criminality and stated that in Brazil it was criminals who decided who lived and who died. There were also photos of Vieite's family crying at his funeral and of the police holding by the neck two of the men involved in the crime and a third that the story fails to identify, and exposing them to photographers as if they were trophies. The men in the photo fit the stereotype of favela residents: they are young, black and shirtless. Two of them have their eyes censored – a sign of them being underage – and the third's genital is censored because it was exposed when the photo was taken. The image portrayed by the photograph is clear, these are animals that threaten civilization; they need to be controlled by any means necessary. Veja's, goal was not to just cover the news – if it were so it would cover the daily murders inside the favelas – but to also influence public opinion in a certain direction. Pierre Bordieu elaborates on the consequences of this practice:

A perverse form of direct democracy can come into play when the media act in a way that is calculated to mobilize the public. Such "direct democracy" maximizes the effect both of the pressures working upon the media and of collective emotion. The usual buffers (not necessarily democratic) against the pressures are linked to the relative autonomy of the political field. Absent this autonomy, we are left with a revenge model, precisely

the model against which the druidical and even political model of justice was established in the first place. It happens on occasions that, unable to maintain the distance necessary for reflection, journalists end up acting like the fireman who sets the fire.[47]

The treatment of Vieite's death by the media is standard practice in Brazil. Editorials from large publications often try to mobilize public support for harsh measures against criminals, including violating human rights and instating the death penalty. These publications go as far as calling human rights privilege for criminals.[48]

The relationship between the media and the police are a clear example of the perverse interaction between the RSA and ISAs. The media publishes statistics provided by the police, and these are considered to be representative of reality. However, as was previously discussed, police actions are biased toward the upper classes. This results in "statistics overrepresent[ing] crimes in which the victim is upper-class and underrepresent[ing] those in which the victim is working-class."[49] The same is true for those who commit the crimes, with an overrepresentation of crimes committed by the poor. The media reproduces a distorted image of reality that supports the idea of violence being connected to poverty.

"TALKING CRIME"

Another very important aspect that needs to be considered regarding the support of violence in Brazilian society is what Teresa Caldeira calls "the talk of crime."[50] According to Caldeira talk of crime is contagious: one story is usually followed by someone else narrating his or her experience. It also orders the city – what areas and what types of people are dangerous and what interactions are allowed. When talking crime "the categories are rigid: they are meant not to describe the world accurately but to organize and classify it symbolically."[51] The talk of crime reinterprets violence and tries to create order from what is in itself a disordering act. However, the order created is ultimately one that legitimizes violence:

The symbolic order engendered in the talk of crime not only discriminates against some groups, promotes their criminalization, and transforms them into victims of violence, but also makes fear circulate through the repetition of histories, and, more important, helps delegitimize the institutions of order and legitimize the use of private, violent, and illegal means of revenge. If the talk of crime promotes a resymbolization of violence, it does not by legitimizing legal violence to counteract illegal violence but by doing the opposite.[52]

The relationship between the talk of crime among the upper classes and the way the media portray violence is complementary. While the talk of crime consists primarily of personal anecdotes, the media's narrative includes distorted statistics that supposedly represent the reality of the situation. The "objective" representation and the subjective experience reflect each other and reify the idea of criminality and violence being associated with the poor and stemming from the favelas. However, this idea does not correspond with reality – it represents the experience of only one side: the asfalto. Talk of crime and the media's portrayal of violence create an environment among the upper classes in which fear ceases to be a natural reaction to violence and becomes the prism through which social problems are understood. The image of favela residents is slowly constructed into

that of savage criminals, and that legitimizes violence against them.

CONCLUSION

In a country where the top one percent of the population earns more than the lowest 50,[53] different forms of control must be exerted so that the structure of inequalities can remain stable. Through repression the State "enables the ruling classes [...] to ensure their domination over the working class."[54] In Rio the police are an essential component to the RSA. They do not work only to fight crime; the violence they use has the political function of preserving the status quo of inequalities. As Luz explained: "How do you keep two million inhabitants, who earn 112 Reais,[55] when they do, under control? How do you keep all the underprivileged under control, calm? With repression."[56] The violent character the police take inside the favelas is not accidental, since the most pervasive form of repression is terror. As Michael Taussig notes, massive populations are controlled through the cultural elaboration of fear.[57] Fear inhibits any significant form of resistance to the existing order from all sides. Inside the favelas people have internalized a sense of exclusion and are too scared to organize themselves. In the urbanized areas people experience violence through a specific narrative in which the locus of the problems is the favela. The favela is perceived as a place to be feared and to be dealt with by the harshest methods – any other alternative would risk enabling criminals. The upper classes support violence by the part of the State because they see it as a form of containing spaces of terror to the favelas. Fear, which exists both inside and outside the favelas in different forms, serves as a powerful insulator against any significant change in the unequal structures of society.

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